

# Educators tour music nonprofit with historic restored organ

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Dan Bauer, dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Slippery Rock University, sits on the organ as it rises from the basement on Saturday, March 22, at Blackwood Arts in Marion Township. Rob McGraw/Butler Eagle

ROB MCGRAW

MARION TWP — Teachers and educators from a few schools in Butler County on Saturday, March 22, toured the nonprofit organization Blackwood Arts to brainstorm ideas of how the 40-acre estate could be an educational resource for students.

The tour culminated in the demonstration of the nonprofit's signature piece, a 1906 Wurlitzer military organ, which has 1,200 pipes used to produce music.

Ben Robertson, founder of Blackwood Arts, said the goal of the organization is to offer a place for historical music education, which could be a boon to their young interests.

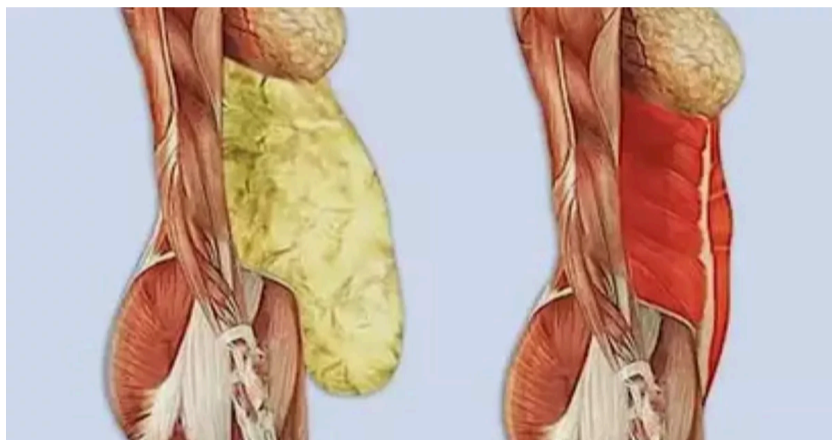
"Getting kids interested in music at an early age, especially fourth grade, it's going to change their life," Robertson said.

"Because we know they do better in all kinds of subjects — in English, in math."

According to Robertson, he and Don Fink have transformed the Blackwood property over the past 50 years to create “magical gardens and impressive architectural creations.” The creations include a four-story clock tower which houses a 1907 Seth Thomas clock with a 6-foot face, and a Schulmerich carillon — a bell tower — that was originally installed at Slippery Rock University.

The organ was particularly impressive to the school administrators who took the tour Saturday. Kevin Boariu, principal of Dassa McKinney Elementary School, said his students visit Blackwood Arts about once a year, and the nonprofit has donated to the school’s music program for years.

“They give so much support to our students,” Boariu said. “The band kids will come every year, see the organ, see the clock tower.”



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Boariu also said field trips to the estate have been exciting for young students. The historical aspects of the restored organ demonstrating 20th century history is also a plus.

“They will play songs they know, like they did the Disney music here,” Boariu said. “I was a history teacher, so to hear them talk about the 20th century and organ music and show them the silent film, it’s always fun for them.”

Dan Bauer, dean of Slippery Rock University’s College of Liberal Arts, rode up on the organ as it was elevated from the basement to the main floor, where Robertson and the visitors had lunch. The organ used Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) programming that was recorded by professional organists who played on the keys previously, so the air was really pushing through the pipes to create the sound — it wasn’t a sound recording being heard in the room.

“It recorded the keystrokes,” Bauer said. “It is pushing the air through the pipes in the exact same way the organist did.”

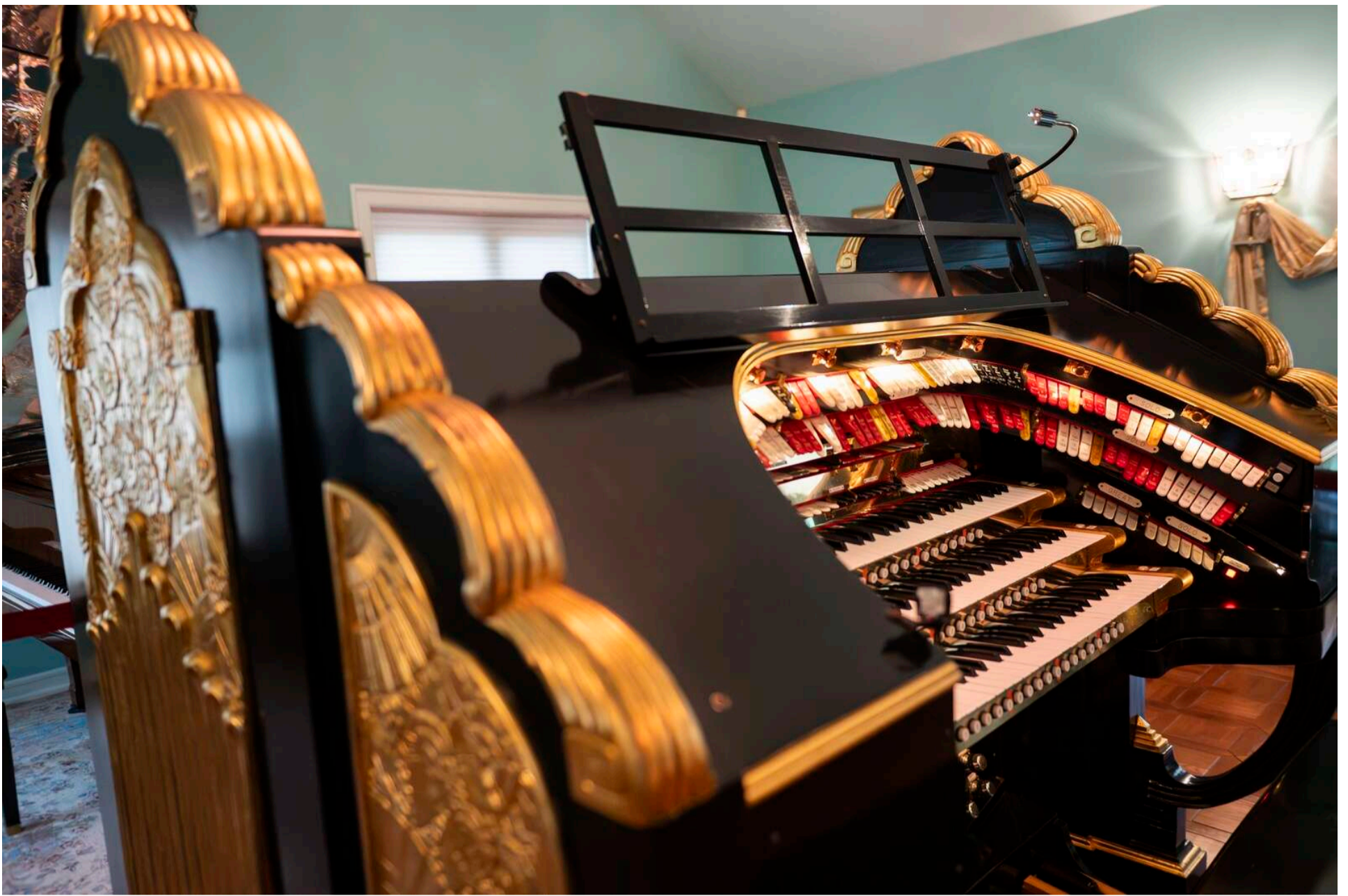
The elevator is operated by Jason Wiles, who helped Robertson and Fink restore the organ, and also lives near the Blackwood Arts property. He explained that the keys being pushed down opened pipes underneath the floor, where air was constantly flowing, which resulted in the sound.

“Everything from the console gets converted to MIDI and ends up going back to the chambers,” Wiles said. “It plays all the effects in the pipes and the shutters and all that.”

Restoring the organ and having it installed in the main house of Blackwood Arts took about five years, according to Fink. He said its historical significance is also made evident to students who visit the nonprofit, because they get to see it in action while watching a short silent movie from the 1920s — the era when organs were used for the sound.

“This was built when movies did not talk,” Fink said. “So they had all the sound effects made on the organ.”





The keys of the self-playing organ with 1,200 pipes that records keystrokes of its players at the home of Ben Robertson who, along with his partner Don Fink, started the nonprofit organization Blackwood Arts in Marion Township. Rob McGraw/Butler Eagle  
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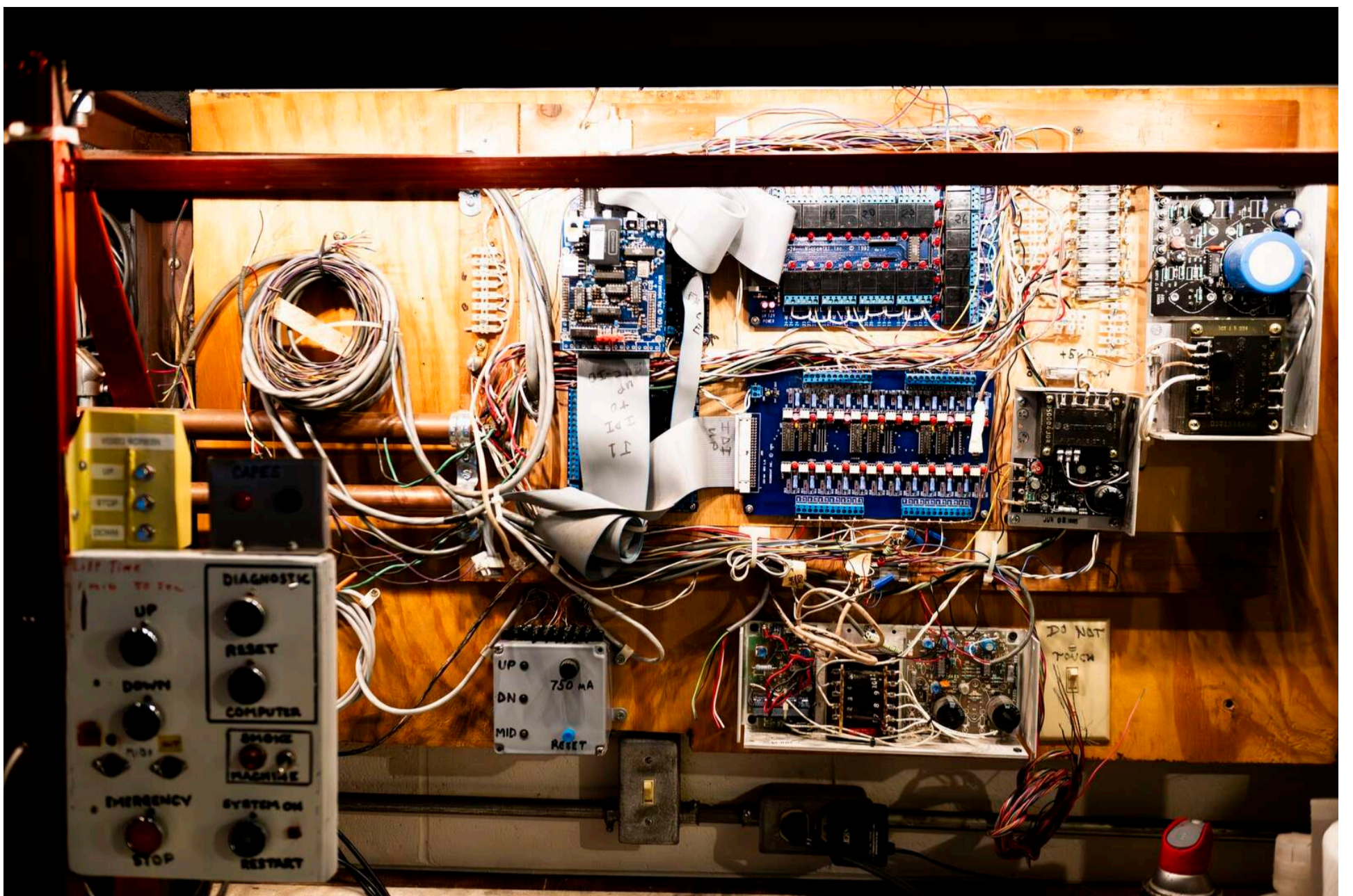


From left, Jason Wiles, Don Fink and Ben Robertson pose with the restored organ Saturday, March 22, at Blackwood Arts in Marion Township on Saturday, March 22, 2025. Rob McGraw/Butler Eagle  
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Jason Wiles discusses some of the elements of the self-rising organ at the nonprofit organization Blackwood Arts in Marion Township. Rob McGraw/Butler Eagle  
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Part of the circuitry that controls the self-playing organ with 1,200 pipes that records keystrokes of its players at Blackwood Arts in Marion Township on Saturday, March 22. Rob McGraw/Butler Eagle  
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